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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the interaction between self and other in the one-to-one writing conference, informed by theories of Louis Althusser, Jurgen Habermas, Mikhail Bakhtin, and others, can help tutors view one-to-one conferences as a dynamic meaning-making process occurring within an integral social context. Bakhtin/Medvedev's discussion of discourse production as a phenomenon determined simultaneously from within and without can help tutors see the numerous interacting forces of the conference process, including ideology, economics, institutionalized meanings, and student and tutor desires. With Althusser, tutors' understanding of ideology's relation to subjectivity and practice lets them recognize that tutors and writers are both "always already" in process within ideological horizons that may not coincide and that need to develop through a dialogic process. With this knowledge tutors can become aware that an institutionalized educational ideology sanctions certain discursive forms--forms that reinforce the conditions of production supporting it--while excluding others, thus leading tutors to appropriate students' texts to make them resemble sanctioned texts, and leading students to relinquish their texts. J. Habermas's critical hermeneutics offers a way of understanding both the organized forces affecting our use of language and the ideologies influencing our interpretive practices. By seeing the student as an equal partner in the composing process, tutors can recognize, problematize and pierce the dissonance arising from the conflicting interaction of the ideologies and interests of tutor and student. (JG)

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Ideology, Process and Subjectivity:

The Role of Hermeneutics in the Writing Conference

The works of such theorist-practitioners as Kenneth
Bruffee, Muriel Harris, Anne Johnstone, Stephen M. North,
Meg Hess Seckendorf, and Tilly and John Warnock, demonstrate
the valuable knowledge to be gained by exploring the nature
of the writing conference. Taken together, these writers
have produced a body of thought that looks beyond formulas
for conferencing. Instead, they have recognized the
theoretical imperative to come to terms with the complex and
dynamic interaction between self and other in which process
occurs. Today I would like to offer you some of my own
reflections concerning the directions which conferencing
theory might take. I base these suggestions on the
strengths of what has already been accomplished in this
field and in light of the projects of contemporary theory as
a whole.

By way of an introduction, I would like to establish a

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few parameters and a few definitions. First of all, when I speak of a writing conference, I will be talking about the kind of conference that can occur in a university, college or high school writing center, a conference where a student comes to the center to talk to or get assistance from a tutor about his or her current writing. Certainly, researchers like Donald Graves and Jan Turbill, to name only two, have investigated teacher-student and student-student class conferencing, but here I wish to address theoretical issues as they are related to tutor, a word with which I am not very comfortable, -student conferencing, or, better, the impossibly cumbersome but theoretically correct, "writer-writer" conferencing. Those other forms of conferencing, those that occur in the writing classroom, entail different social contexts and therefore different dynamics of power. While there may be relationships between the theoretical or ideological implications among tutor-student and other kinds of in-class conferencing, indeed--I hope that there are--I recognize that it is a mistake to fall to the beguiling temptation of making universal judgments about highly particular social contexts. Such thinking leads to premature closure.

And I want to be most adamant on this point. Because I recognize that meaning making is a social process, I feel the need to be as precise as possible when I speak of the social context in which meaning is produced. After all, a context is integral, is one of the messages of the text

produced in it, and I see no valid reason to believe that our writing centers or our conferencing processes have any less impact on the meaning of the texts produced there or have any less effect on the writing processes enacted there than other social contexts. Therefore, I see a need to scrutinize and understand the kind of places that our writing centers are and the kinds of processes that our conferencing entails.

But I also have other reasons for being as specific as I can when I speak about the writing conference. The study of the conference offers a unique opportunity to investigate the social process of composing in a detailed way because social processes are so clearly dramatized during a conference. In this regard, let me suggest that the kind of research that can be done in a university writing center does not, like a mere ghost of literary research, haunt the margins of the contemporary English department. No, conference theory and research occupies a central place in the theoretical heart of the contemporary English department precisely because it entails the study of the social nature of text production, a topic of concern for both composition and literary theory.

This concern for the social process of discourse production can also be important for tutor training. For instance, as Bakhtin/Medvedev tell us, "every literary phenomenon, like every other ideological phenomenon, is simultaneously determined from without (extrinsically) and

from within (intrinsically)" (29). A statement such as this has important implications for conference theory and practice. First, it reminds us, in a rather "mechanistic" way, to borrow a bit of self-criticism from Bakhtin/Medvedev, that the conference process is informed by interacting external and internal forces. It is influenced from without by everything from ideology to capitalist economics, to the ways in which educational institutions institutionalize meaning, and even to the process whereby meaning is made. In addition, it suggests that the writing conference is influenced from within as well as from without by everything from a student's desire to get a good grade, to his or her motivation to become a better writer, to the tutor's attitudes toward a particular student writer, and even to his or her own temptation to appropriate a particular student's text. It is also important to note here that these extrinsic and intrinsic influences are not mutually exclusive; rather, they exist in a dynamic relation. A student writer's desire to get a good grade--an internal factor--is, among many other things, a result of the fact that he or she is being educated in a society where good grades signify one's marketability, one's readiness for the job market--an external factor.

But what does all of this entail for the writing tutor and his or her training? It suggests that tutors can purposefully be trained in composition and conferencing theory, but it also supports tutor training that encompasses

what we know about the social process of meaning making. Such training might include the establishment of methods for critical self-reflection on the part of tutors, particularly reflection about one of the most opaque forces that affects the social process of discourse making, namely, ideology. The assumption with which I am working is that tutors need to continually reflect on the invisible ideological forces that permeate our practice, even the interplay between among these forces.

While Louis Althusser's theory has been justly criticized for its structuralist shortcomings, it still offers insights into the relation of ideology to subjectivity and practice. It suggests to us, for instance, that tutors may not be aware that they, like the student-writers with whom they work, come to the conference as "always already subjects" (172). Tutors and writers are "always already" in process within ideological horizons that, first, may not coincide and, second, need to develop through a dialogic process--in this case, that of the conference itself. What is more, as Meg Hess Seckendorf's research demonstrates, this process entails conflict between tutor and writer, a "dissonance" that may be necessary to the conference process even as it threatens to undermine it, a conflict that makes collaboration a goal rather than a certainty. In fact, tutors should remember that this conflict is complicated by the presence of Bakhtin's absent third (Todorov 111), a teacher, whose intentions and

ideologies shape the conference even by intensifying the ideological struggle between tutor and writer.

Althusser's work can also aid us in helping tutors become aware that their practices are textured by an institutionalized, educational ideology that sanctions certain discursive forms while excluding others. This ideology can lead a tutor to appropriate a student's text, to make it look and sound like an institutionally sanctioned text, to make it conform to the tutor's notions of what texts that get good grades sound like (I am not saying that this practice is in itself wrong-minded--not as long, that is, as we intend our writing centers to do it). This same educational ideology can even, especially in our "process" minded time, lead a tutor to attempt to take control of a student's composing process so that it will proceed as the best composition theorists of our day tell us it should. In this case the tutor is no longer offering options, he or she is, despite their best intentions, institutionalizing composing and is reproducing the conditions of production as they are set out by the educational ideology. For the student, on the other hand, the educational ideology that informs his or her role or practices as a student can lead him or her to relinquish control of their text. In order to have a paper conform to his or her conception of what institutionally sanctioned texts sound like, that is, in order to get a good grade, a student who has received frequent and negative evaluations from teachers or who feels

blocked in the face of an impending deadline may be quite willing to have a writing tutor, someone associated with success as a writer, take control of his or her text so that the tutor might produce success for them. What is more, a motivated student may even be willing to mimic the writing process with which a tutor, especially a trusted tutor, is affiliated. The point, and those who have tutored know this, is that a conference can go right or wrong in a multitude of ways. What we need to remember is that the educational ideology sanctions institutional practice and plays a key role in the direction that a writing conference takes.

Now I am not saying that tutors should not try to facilitate a student writer's growth by suggesting a range of options for making the composing process more versatile and productive. If anything, most of the students that I deal with in conferences have monolithic conceptions about how composing is transacted, ideas that block experimentation and development. Instead, what I am saying is that writing centers can be centers of critical or non-critical thinking, of radical or institutional activity. The difficulty is that we may often be institutional just when we most think we are being radical. What we must remember is that the educational ideology, because it is an ideology, reinforces the conditions of production that, in turn, support it, and it is easy for an overworked tutor or teacher to lose sight of this and serve an ideology that, if

it were less transparent, just might be abhorrent. For instance, how could we, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s work reminds us, support an educational ideology in which a black writer must "posit a full and sufficient self in a language where blackness is a sign of absence?" (12). How could we, as Susan Gubar's work says to us, support an educational ideology which represents "a long tradition identifying the male author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation--a secondary object lacking autonomy, endowed with often contradictory meaning but denied intentionality" (77)? These theoretical issues, I would argue, impact on tutors students whether they can articulate them or not.

Tutors should be prepared, then, for the project of coming to terms with the ideologies informing the policies of his or her institution and writing center, the ideologies informing the interests and writing practices of student-writers, the ideologies informing his or her own interests and conferencing practices, as well as the interplay among all of these. Such a study would include the study of how the educational ideology at work in a particular institution is subserviant to society's dominant ideology and the ways in which it embodies the "codes and forms" (Eagleton 152) whereby teachers teach and tutors conference. Or, should we accept Abercrombie, Hill and Turner's critique of the dominant ideology thesis, we might chose to study how our educational ideology reflects a set of divergent, non-

cohesive beliefs that reinforces the economic relations set up in our late capitalist age. In this case, we would have to investigate the ways in which forces such as politics and concerns such as marketability affect the ways in which we teach and tutor and the ways in which students learn.

Either way, the kind of study and tutor training that I am calling for entails no mean tasks. But if we can agree that something called ideology is all around us, informing our practice, then it is important that we find it. Paulo Freire suggests that we can. He claims that if we first realize that we are free to do so, we may find the means to distance ourselves from ideology in order to see it for the first time. To accomplish this calls for a peculiar mindset, something like Ira Shor's "irony of consciousness," a kind of mental act whereby the study of how we are not free can be the first step toward liberation (12-14).

Alone, this would be optimistic enough for my workaday purposes if it were not for the fact that if I think about it for very long, I remember that social contexts are constantly changing. The tremendous burden of the ironic consciousness, therefore, is also its most liberatory problem--its task is never done. What we must do in the face of this difficulty is start to illuminate portions of the ideological fabric in which we work, particularly those elements of our conferencing practices that are fairly standard or repetitive, and make our marks upon them. In order to affect ideology we must see it, and we can see it

as it results in specific practices as they are enacted in particular contexts.

This task calls for a critical hermeneutics, and Jürgen Habermas' conception of hermeneutics, as well as his critique of traditional hermeneutics, can be instructive in this regard. When the focus of our interpretation of social reality relies, to put it simply, on the rehabilitation of tradition, when one's present practice claims as its legitimation the authority of an institutionally sanctioned practice, the critical reflection that one can enact is not the kind that can begin to illuminate an institution's interests. Self-reflection based in the practice of legitimizing past conditions of knowledge is not, after all, very critical. Instead, a critical hermeneutics would offer a way of arriving at an understanding, however incomplete it may be, of both the organized forces affecting our use of language and the ideologies influencing our practices. I do not mean to imply here that historical understanding is not of value in present critical thinking. We are never very far from history. Rather, I am saying that the study of history's impact on the present and the possibility for action in the face of the historical may be greater goals.

It has been often said that a text is the medium of ideological struggle. If we can help tutors become, through reading, directed journal writing and staff discussions, more sensitive to the ways in which their ideologies and interests and the ideologies and interests of students come

into conflict during the course of a conference, then perhaps we can train tutors to be better able to respond creatively to the student-writer. This calls for a kind of critical, creative understanding, or "exotopy" in Bakhtin's hermeneutics (Todorov 109). Such a creative understanding would require that a tutor be trained to recognize, problematize and pierce the "dissonance," again, in Meg Hess Seckendorf's use of the word, occurring between tutor and student-writer. To accomplish this, tutors must learn to seek the student-writer as another writer in his or her alterity, to recognize his or her rights as an "other-self" (Todorov 109), to answer the student-writer's need for response as an "other-self," and to enter into "genuine dialogue" in Freire's sense of the term, as an equal partner in the composing process. If at the same time we are training tutors, we are empowering them to introduce the kind of marginal, alterior action and statements that can alter the nature, shape and structure of the institution, all the better.

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